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ABSTRACT

The highest levels of dissatisfaction registered by practicing rural teachers in Australia about their training were toward distinctly rural components: multi-grade teaching, rural living, and school-community relationships. School-community relationships are important, especially so in rural areas because most rural schools are the center of their community. The teacher preparation course at the University of Ballarat (Victoria, Australia) includes a semester-long unit titled "Rural Australia," which examines the sociology of rural communities and schools and promotes student understanding of how a teacher's behavior can win or lose community acceptance and esteem. The course is offered to second-year primary trainees and has been offered to practicing teachers on weekends or school vacations. Students are made aware that rural Australians are class conscious and their society is highly stratified. Status differentiation on the basis of gender exists, and is studied. Other topics studied are strategies for teacher acceptance or rejection, teaching Aboriginal children, distance education, telematics, and problems associated with rural unemployment. An important aspect of the unit is the case study that students must conduct and present to the class. Each student selects a rural community and investigates aspects of stratification and the requirements for a young teacher to fit in socially. Excerpts from one case study are included, along with comments from students about how the unit would assist them in the future. Contains 35 references. (TD)

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A Focus on Rural Australia for Students at the University of Ballarat.

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A Focus on Rural Australia for Students at the University of Ballarat.

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Abstract (and introduction)

The teacher preparation course at the University of Ballarat includes a unit titled 'Rural Australia'. This subject, that 79% of second year Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Teaching students undertook during Semester 1 1997, examines the sociology of rural communities and schools. It is especially designed to promote students' understanding of how the attributes and behaviour of rural school teachers can win (or lose) community acceptance and esteem. The contradiction that rural Australians are friendly and welcoming but can take twenty years to fully accept outsiders, is focused upon.

Each student carries out a case study of a rural town or village, and its school, as an assessable task for their 'Rural Australia' unit. They examine sources of division and/or community cohesion in depth. The role of the teacher is especially important. The subject, 'Rural Australia', is also periodically offered to post-graduate (fourth year upgrading) students, almost all of whom are practising teachers, working in rural schools. The comments and suggestions of these Bachelor of Education students about the unit has ensured that the content reflects the concerns of contemporary rural school teachers.

This paper examines the purpose and structure of the 'Rural Australia' elective subject. General information about Ballarat University's primary teacher trainees is also provided.

The university and its students

As the university's home page explains:

> Ballarat itself is a major regional centre within a rich agricultural hinterland and an area of considerable natural beauty. The wealth from the gold discoveries last century provided Ballarat with a heritage of grand Victorian architecture and infrastructure comparable with cities many times its size.

The university is fully independent, and small. Until recently the student body consisted of only 4,000 students. * *The Good Universities Guide to Access and Equity Programs* (1997 p 145) states:

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> The university makes genuine efforts to open up education to those who have missed out in the past, and an astonishing eight out of ten students are from backgrounds which are, by official definitions, 'disadvantaged' in one way or another.

Ballarat University places a high emphasis on teaching and learning, 'although research is beginning to get more attention'.

The students at the University of Ballarat have been well placed to undertake a study of rural Australia. A Department of Employment, Education and Training report reveals that in 1991 75% came from rural and isolated areas. The proportion of students from similar backgrounds consisted of 76% at the University of Central Queensland, 67% at the University of Southern Queensland and 58% at both Southern Cross University and the University of New England. Hence Ballarat had, in 1991 at least, the second highest percentage of students from rural and isolated backgrounds out of all of Australia's universities. (*Australian* 9 April 1997 p 40) Furthermore, *The Good Universities Guide to Access and Equity Programs* (1997, p 145) indicates that the university has continued to be amongst the highest 20%.**

EQUITY INDICATORS
1997 Domestic Students at University of Ballarat as at 31/3/1997

	Where are rural and isolated students?	Where are Austudy students?
University of Ballarat (N=4398)	73.1%	37.6%
B.Arts/B.Teach (N=281)	65.1%	52.7%

*In recent weeks an amalgamation with Wimmera Institute of Technology and Ballarat's School of Mines & Industries - An Institute of T.A.F.E. has resulted in this number increasing to 18,000. (*Ballarat Courier*, 18 June 1997, p1)

** Specific percentages for other universities were not available.

The School of Education at Ballarat University has a total of approximately 330 equivalent full-time students, and thirteen full-time and more than half a dozen sessional members of staff. Two hundred and eighty-one students are studying in the four year Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Teaching course. The Bachelor of Arts component, which consists of major and minor subject specialities, is delivered by other schools in the university. Physical Education is a very popular speciality choice, and psychology is also a major area of study for many of our students. The B.A/B.Teach qualification provides our graduates with the

opportunity of gaining both primary and secondary registration, although most intend to initially teach in the primary sector.

Alan Smith (1988 p 171) suggested that

> the single most important factor influencing ... students' willingness to accept appointments to inland areas was their lack of familiarity with these areas.

Alexander and Bandy (1989 p 121) also found that most newly graduating teachers preferred their initial teaching appointment to be in a familiar location where they had the support of family and friends. A high proportion of trainee teaching students from rural backgrounds at Ballarat possibly predispose many to return to a rural community to teach after graduating.

Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Teaching students' home addresses as at 31/3/97

	1st year students' home address	2nd year students' home address	3rd year students' home address	4th year students' home address
Ballarat	20.2%	21.3%	25.0%	15.2%
Barwon	17.4%	16.0%	25.5%	18.2%
C Highlands (excl Ballarat)	5.5%	13.3%	9.4%	6.1%
E Gippsland	0.9%	5.3%	1.6%	0.0%
Gippsland	4.6%	4.0%	1.6%	6.1%
Goulburn	3.7%	0.0%	1.6%	3.0%
Loddon	2.8%	1.3%	3.1%	3.0%
Mallee	1.8%	9.3%	4.7%	12.1%
Melbourne	24.8%	16.0%	14.1%	15.2%
Ovens	0.0%	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%
W District	11.9%	6.7%	4.7%	12.1%
Wimmera	4.6%	5.3%	7.8%	6.1%
Interstate	1.8%	0.0%	1.6%	3.0%
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

The need to provide intending school teachers with an understanding of rural teaching and living

Most teacher appointees to rural schools throughout Australia are young, (Watson, 1988 p 159) and this circumstance is expected to accentuate in the future. As the Australian Council of Deans of Education explained in January 1997: 'A looming teacher shortage is likely to be more severe than the notorious shortage of the 1970s and will be most severely felt in rural and other disadvantaged areas'. (*Australian* 27 January 1997 p 3)

Turney Sinclair and Cairns (1980 31) confirmed that 'most country schools find it extremely difficult to attract and retain suitably qualified and experienced teachers' despite ample evidence that

> Good teachers who are prepared to stay in isolated communities for relatively long periods of time are ... seen as assets to those communities'. (Boylan et al 1990:55)

As Boylan et al noted: 'Particularly rural schools on the western side of the Great Dividing Range are more difficult to staff than schools on the eastern side' (Boylan et al 1989:131)

As early as the 1920s educational administrators recognised that teacher training colleges should be situated in regional centres to cater for the educational needs of rural communities. In 1928 the Minister of Education in New South Wales D.H. Drummond established a teachers college at Armidale on the basis that

> if students were recruited from country areas and trained in a country college then they would be likely to want to teach in the country. (Newman 1985:202)

Victoria's first Director of Education, Frank Tate, had established teachers colleges at Ballarat and Bendigo for the same reason two years previously. (Blake, 1972: 890)

Recent studies confirm that an appointment to a rural school is an unattractive option for many trainee teachers. In 1986 Watson, Hatton, Squires and Grundy (1987:4) found that most intending primary school teachers in New South Wales aimed to end up on the North Coast. Their investigation revealed that only 20% of pre-service primary teacher education students and 4% of pre-service secondary students were prepared to teach anywhere in the state, and that most had little experience of rural lifestyles and a negative attitude towards a rural appointment.

Very few pre-service teacher education courses prepare students for rural school teaching. Watson found that 88% of graduating students in New South Wales had been denied a rural component in their training, and Lake confirmed that in Western Australia 84% had not been provided with a course directly related to rural education (Watson 1988:159) despite the appointment of almost 70% of primary and early childhood graduates to rural schools. (Lake, 1985:111) Thus, as Lake explained, many beginning rural teachers encountered a 'professional and social situation largely unconsidered and unencountered during their pre-service programme'. For many their major preoccupation was consequently a struggle for survival. This is confirmed by surveys of practising teachers. Lake (1985:113,117) found that the highest levels of dissatisfaction registered by teachers about the inadequacy of their training was in those areas which were distinctive to the rural situation, namely multi-grade teaching (80.6%), rural living (83.9%) and school-community relationships (60.2%). Crowther, Cronk, King & Gibson (1991:18) also found that

> Relatively inexperienced teachers often report major concerns about their ability to plan for and successfully implement multigrade teaching; to carry out required administrative duties; and to manage school-community relations

Hence it is not surprising that many rural teacher educators argue that 'issues about rural lifestyles, community participation and ... opportunities for multigrade and rural practice teaching experiences' should be provided at teacher education institutions. (Boylan, Squires, Smith 1994:23)

Teachers newly appointed to isolated rural schools have frequently been portrayed as suffering from culture shock. Clashes with the values of local communities are not uncommon. (Crowther, Cronk, King and Gibson, 1991:18) Beginning urban teachers have little or no social relationships with parents but for beginning rural teachers, 'the relationship ... takes place within both the professional and the social context'. (Lake 1985:116) Moreover, not only do teachers from urban backgrounds have little understanding of rural life, they are also unlikely to remain in a rural teaching position for long thus being deprived of an opportunity to develop an understanding. Rural perceptions of teachers as a transient section of the population unwilling to integrate into the local community are thus well-founded. (Lake, 1985:115)

Doune Macdonald (1994:1) stressed the need for beginning teachers to form 'positive relationships with communities'. This is especially important for rural communities. As Bernadette Bowie (1995:36) stated:

> Community-school links are important and should be improved and encouraged regardless of location. However, the link in rural areas is usually greater because most small, rural schools are the centre of their small community.

Because, as Lake (1985:112) explained, many beginning teachers were

> faced with professional demands for which they were not well prepared, and social circumstances with which they had little or no empathy, ... specialised preparation for rural schools is not only desirable, it is imperative.

Sheila King (1994:31) reinforced this suggestion when stating that pre-service teachers must have 'the opportunity to identify the characteristics associated with rural teaching and living'.

John Carrick in the Report of the Committee of Review of New South Wales in 1989 'recommended that pre-service teacher education courses needed to provide more adequate

training of teachers for rural schools', (Boylan & Hemmings 1992:127) with Bill Cross (1987:46) in his study of British Colombia, Canada, recommending that 'student teachers selected for a rural program must take a course in rural sociology or the equivalent' Alexander and Bandy (1989:130) also recommended that 'courses on rural living and rural teaching strategies should be offered in all teacher education programs'. Furthermore, as several authors explained, satisfied practising rural school teachers saw their contentment as

> a complex integration of many factors including positive interpersonal relations with students and community members, a sense of personal achievement, and demonstrated community appreciation and support. (Crowther et al 1991:19)

The students who elect to study 'Rural Australia'

'Rural Australia' is a semester long elective unit that has been offered to second year primary trainees at Ballarat University since 1987. This year 79% of second year students studied the unit, although their choice was limited to only one other offering - a sociology unit on schooling. 'Rural Australia' has also been, in the past, offered to fourth year Bachelor of Education (Primary) Upgrading students. It has been delivered on weekends or during school holiday vacations. Last year fourteen practising teachers elected to study the subject at fourth year level.

The home addresses of the students studying 'Rural Australia' can be categorised. Of the fourteen upgrading students who studied 'Rural Australia' in Semester 2 last year all lived in regional or rural localities. Many were headteachers or teachers in relatively small rural schools, three taught in schools in Ballarat, one was an unemployed teacher working in Ballarat, and one was a kindergarten teacher in a country location. All lived in the same geographical areas that they were employed in or nearby. Hence none lived in Melbourne or Geelong. The home locations of the second year students who studied the elective subject were however quite different and are tabulated below:

	Rural Australia	Other elective
Ballarat	19.80%	26.75%
Barwon	17.8%	13.25%
C Highlands (excluding Ballarat)	12.5%	20%
E Gippsland	5.36%	6.75%
Gippsland	3.57%	0%
Loddon	1.78%	0%
Mallee	12.5%	0%
Melbourne	10.7%	26.5%
Ovens	1.78%	0%
W District	0%	0%

Wimmera (Note: Some part-time students did not study either subject)	5.36%	6.75%
Total	**100.0%**	**100%**

Rural Australia - the content of the unit

The subject 'Rural Australia is designed to provide students with an understanding of the complexities of rural society. The social aspects of rural school teaching is especially focused upon.

Lectures encompass Russel Ward's (1966) view that Nineteenth Century Rural Australia was essentially egalitarian, with the exception of a politically and economically powerful squatter class. Drovers, shearers, bullock drivers, and selectors all shared a spirit of mateship and pride in a bush lifestyle and Patterson, Lawson and the Bulletin popularised this view.

Many sociologists undermine the validity of the rural myth and argue that rural Australians were class conscious and that their society was highly stratified. Leslie Lomas, (1979) in his examination of Western District farmers in the 1920s, found a gradation of status groupings that were closely related to income. Graziers, wheat farmers, and potato and onion growers formed the main status categories. Richard Dickens's (1980) examination of the Buln Buln Shire in Gippsland found that a farmer's status was a determinant of his or her political and social influence.

Ron Wild's (1974) study of Bradstow is a particularly useful study of social stratification that enables students to understand the divisiveness than can exist in some country towns. Harry Oxley's (1974) study of Rylstone and Kandos and Kenneth Dempsey's (1990) study of Smalltown (St Arnaud) consolidates this understanding.

Status differentiation on the basis of gender is not neglected. Dempsey's study of Smalltown provides a valuable introduction to this aspect of community interaction and Gretchen Poiner's (1990) '... Gender and Other Power Relations in a Rural Community' offers a more detailed understanding.

The remainder of the course is devoted to aspects of schoolteaching in Rural Australia. Strategies for teacher acceptance or rejection are considered, and teaching aboriginal children and distance education, and especially telematics, are other topics of investigation. Problems associated with rural unemployment are also studied and discussed.

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'Rural Australia' serves as an introductory unit to help develop students' rural schoolteaching skills. All of the students spend half a day assisting in a rural school as part of their assessment. This is a requirement that could perhaps be extended further. Detailed instruction in multigrade teaching and associated process strategies are offered to these students during their third and fourth years of study.

A Case Study: Underbool

An important aspect of the Rural Australia unit is the case studies that the students are required to carry out and present to the class. Each student selects a rural community and investigates aspects of stratification and the requirements for a young teacher to fit in socially.

A student, several months ago, studied Underbool. She granted me permission to discuss her investigation at this conference.

Underbool, with a population of 268 people, is situated approximately ninety kilometres from both the South Australian and New South Wales borders, in Victoria's Mallee. Wheat growing and sheep grazing are the predominant forms of farming in the district.

The township of Underbool consists of a general store, a newsagency, Dalgety's, a bank, a post office, a hotel, a bush nursing centre and a garage, as well as residential housing. There are three churches, netball, tennis, cricket, bowls and golf clubs, a fire brigade, and a C.W.A. The local football league was forced to amalgamate with another due to decreasing numbers, thus compelling ardent supporters to have to travel up to 200 kilometres to see their local team members play. Employment categories consist of farmers, teachers, nurses, shearers, and part-time workers at the silo during harvest. Newcomers can find local acceptance difficult unless they play sport, become involved in local groups or have ties with the townsfolk.

The township was found to be divided into six distinctive social groups. These ranged from the businessmen who dominated the council, to the poor who were friendly but lacked material possessions and self esteem. Valuable advice about the role of schoolteachers in small rural communities was provided. The students were made aware that as children and/or their parents were present at most social functions the local teachers could not forget that they were role models both within and outside the school. The investigator further advised that teachers must be members of the community and approachable. Involvement in sport was

desirable. The benefits of teaching in a small school included smaller class sizes and a strong sense of ownership of the school by both students and parents.

The second year Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of teaching student made a video about the town. It was shown to a 'Rural Australia' tutorial class and served as a conclusion to her orally delivered evaluation of the community.

7. The students' perceptions of the course

The second year students were asked to comment upon how the unit 'Rural Australia' would assist them as rural school teachers in the future. Their comments are, I believe, an indication of the value of such a course and have been cited at some length.

Students' comments:

* When entering a new community a teacher must be aware of where they are required to slot in to a hierarchical order, in order to not 'overstate' or exhibit behaviour which is expected of someone of a lower order.

* The subordinate and oppressed state of women within many rural communities could be a shock to female teachers - especially when they realise that the same standards are expected of them. ... But there are advantages and some of them may only be a matter of perspective: fresh air, casual slower paced lifestyle, town amenities and facilities are accessible and cheap, the higher esteem, (teaching still considered a profession) that the town holds for its teachers, the community pride and interest that 'our school' commands and the support that this generates, the smaller numbers mean that you can really get to know your students.

* A new teacher may need to be actively involved in sporting activities and need to approach the community to ask what they may do, join etc to break the ice. In some communities ... however a teacher must simply learn to remain in their allotted place.

* Teachers need to be aware of any stratification system that may affect their pupils. Socioeconomic, dysfunctional family situations etc all affect a child's ability to learn and so a teacher needs to understand the child's position in the social structure to help support their educational needs.

* To be an effective rural school teacher one must watch who they associate with, participate in community events and organisations, accept that in many towns there is a hierarchical system and that in some towns the teacher may not be held in high esteem whereas in others they may be prominent figures.

* One of the worst things a teacher can do when they belong to a rural community is ... misbehave ... Once a person gets a reputation in a small community it unfortunately sticks ... I have seen this happen and it has ramifications for the school as well.

* A teacher in a small community should become involved in some way. They could join the local football club, coach a group of children in a chosen sport. They could join a group like the Lions, Apex or Red Cross. Even if they just go and watch the children participate in a sport or score the match, they are seen as being involved in the local community, which the parents like.

* A teacher with strong ideals and beliefs may find that they do not fit into a town that is divided by gender inequality, ... religion or race.

*As a teacher, theories on stratification are very helpful to tell us that there are actually very distinct classes within many towns that don't mix and won't mix.

* Being from a small rural town myself I thought I knew all about what it would be like to fit into a rural town ... as a soon to be teacher. This subject opened my eyes to the truth, that a small country town can be very stratified and that it is not always easy to fit in.

* Teachers must understand the 'Goldfish Bowl effect' as they are constantly observed and analysed by everyone in a small rural town. Thus they must behave accordingly.

* The school is often a centre of the community. As such, teachers are not only seen and judged professionally but also privately.

* Parental involvement, community support and studies relevant to the history and context of the school should be embraced by rural school teachers.

* To succeed as a rural schoolteacher I must have a positive outlook, offer encouragement and have confidence in my actions. I must become involved in community activities and make a strong effort to get to know parents within the town. ... It is sometimes difficult to make friends in highly stratified towns, but the best must be made of the situation.

Conclusion

Numerous studies by rural educationalists indicate that prospective teachers who grew up in rural locations and attended a rural teacher education institution were the most likely to seek a rural appointment. (Boylan and Hemmings, 1992:128) The research for this investigation confirms the accuracy of this understanding with 80% of students who elected to study 'Rural Australia' stating that they would be willing to or intended to teach in a school in rural Victoria and 64% stating a willingness to teach in an interstate rural school. Only 6% were unwilling to teach in a Victorian rural school. Complaints by newly graduated teachers that they are ill-prepared for a rural school appointment can be addressed, to some extent at least,

by the provision in all teacher education courses of a rural sociology unit similar to the 'Rural Australia' subject that is offered at Ballarat.

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